"Take Utopia to be where you are now" Elspeth Owen

I first saw Elspeth Owen's pots at the 1987 Potter's Camp held at Aberystwyth Arts Centre. We sat on the grass by her tent whilst she carefully unwrapped them. Thin-walled, with surfaces that looked naturally resolved rather than decorated, small enough to cup in the hand, they had a fragile intensity. I suspect that many people try, and fail, to make pots like these when they first attempt handbuilding. They are the kind of pots that look timeless, with an affinity with stones, shells and bird's eggs. Though employing quite different techniques Katherine Playford Bouvier made pots of this kind. My first thought was a protective one. Would their undoubted beauty be perceived? In what kind of context would they properly be appreciated? Both shops and galleries seemed inappropriate.

As we shall see these instinctive responses were not altogether irrational.

Elspeth Owen began to make pots in the early seventies. She had read history at university, had worked as a student counsellor and for Peter Lazlett's Cambridge Group, studying the family and population. By then she had two small sons. Academic life can be simultaneously absorbing and sterile and she turned away from it to train as a psychotherapist and began an active thorough going involvement with the woman's movement.

In 1973 she started going to pottery evening classes (taught by Zoe Ellison). It was natural for her to handbuild (though she had done a little throwing whilst teaching history at Darlington Hall as a young postgraduate). In 1975 she went to New Guinea with her husband and sons. Her commitment to psycho-therapy dropped away in this fresh environment. She was interested in the material culture of the islands, in the wood carving, the feather work and body decorations. The pots she saw seemed crude and heavy. But she had already begun to see herself as a potter. At that point this was something of an imaginative leap but before leaving England she already found a studio — the beautiful wooden pavilion at Granchester where she still works — and in New Guinea a year of enforced leisure was to build up a head of creative steam for the new kind of work she was about to undertake. She made the mental transition from enthusiast to professional during this period. Later, when she first glimpsed Ruth Duckworth's pots in Tony Birk's The Art of the Modern Potter she responded with a feeling of recognition and reassurance. She felt that she could continue along that path.
Soon after her return to England she took some pots to show to Henry Rothschild — at that time she barely appreciated his importance in the studio ceramic world. He liked her work and put pieces straight into a large show in the gallery attached to Kettle’s Yard. It was, as she saw it, a “ridiculously lucky break”. A few years later in 1983 the V&A bought one of her pieces from a Kettle’s Yard show. By 1986 she had had a memorable show at the V&A craft shop. During that time her pots became increasingly delicate and more resolved — they were still made entirely by pinching and scraping and fired at lower and lower temperatures. One motive for this was economy, another was the difficulty of introducing foreign elements into the electric kiln she was then using — for these together with oxides mixed into the clay created the beautiful unpredictable surfaces of her work.

All through this period of technical growth there was an important parallel text to her work. It can often seem heavy handed and awkward to link works of art to political activity but the special art forms and kinds of excellence associated with the woman’s movement have definite echoes in Elspeth Owen’s work. The kind of sensibility I am referring to is intelligently discussed by Guy Brett in his chapter on Greenham Common in Through Our Own Eyes: Popular Art and Modern History. In 1981 Elspeth Owen was on that first walk to Greenham Common which was to result in the permanent camp there. Together with other Cambridge women she was to put together a selection of women’s writings on peace and war — My Country Is The Whole World (Pandora Press 1984). Certain political acts were to be directly alluded to in her pottery whilst we may guess at others.

In 1982 she was arrested for cutting the fence at Molesworth. After leaving the magistrates court at Huntingdon on 16th December she made a private decision to walk the hundred miles to Greenham in order to arrive there on Christmas Day. She made her way there as directly as possible cross country, sleeping rough, taking photographs of her route, but because she was a woman alone, travelling quickly and fearfully. The subsequent pots shaped by wrappings wound round them were elegiac commentaries on the self reliance of the traveller, carrying her house on her back, carefully wrapping and unwrapping the necessities she needs to carry.

But her pieces also relate to Greenham in less direct ways. There is an affecting photograph by Tim Malyon in Guy Brett’s book of an egg placed between the coarse mesh of the fence at Greenham. On it someone has written: “For Peace”. Like most of the unselﬁsh craft art which decorated the fence the egg and its inscription made a powerful point about amplermerity and fragility. One cannot push the comparison too far — most of the art of the fence tended to be simply made and much of its strength lay in its context. Elspeth Owen’s pots are, of course, more sophisticated in facture. Nonetheless, like a number of other woman potters — Sue John for instance — she prides herself on the straightforwardness of her equipment and the freedom this brings. In the winter months she has taken to working away from Granchester. For that reason the portable gas kiln which she designed and built with some friends is crucial to her work.

In her studio Elspeth Owen keeps a considerable body of work that is so autobiographical that she does not intend to sell it. These pieces share space with every kind of found object. Superﬁcially this arrangement seems familiar enough. Pebbles, driftwood, shells, are part of the early modernist aesthetic of these islands, dominant in the studios of Hepworth, Moore and Nicholson and preserved intact in Jim Ede’s house in Cambridge (co-incidentally the Kettle’s Yard in whose attached gallery Owen had her ﬁrst exhibitions). But in fact her sensibility is rather different — with a powerful sense of private rituals and with an intensity that is quite different from the middle class purities of Kettle’s Yard.

Elspeth Owen feels that Bernard Leach and indeed most orientally inspired pottery has had very little inﬂuence on her. Even though much studio pottery looks to the past, she in particular appears to be working in another time set. Of course her techniques reﬂect those of the non-wheel potters of many pre-industrial cultures. But her pots have quite a different charge to that of Magdalene Odundo and Fiona Salazar who take the forms of African or South American pots and heighten their presence with starker shapes and feats of burnishing.

Instead, Elspeth Owen follows what appears to me to be a more diﬃcult path, creating work which makes its strength through a special kind of tenderness and lack of obvious structure. Her most recent work, which is slab built and asymmetrical, looks set to pursue this demanding aesthetic still more profoundly.
"Boed eich paradwys yn y man lle’r ydych" Elspeth Owen

Y tro cyntaf i ni weld crochenwalth Elspeth Owen oedd yn y Gwersyll Crochenyclidan a gynhaliwyd yng Nghanolfan y Celfyddydau Aberystwyth ym 1987. Roedd ni’n ei steddi ar y borsa y tu allan i’w phhebl tra oedd hi’n dod bacio ei gwaith yn ofasus. Yn ôl i gyntaf i’n dal yng Nghymru, a chydag ochrâu meinion ac arwynebau a edrychent fel pe’n gynnrych natur yn hytrach nag yn ganlyniad addurno, roedd rhwy angerdd bregus yn perthyn iddynt. Gallaf gredu i lawer o bobol geisio, a methu, llunio potiau fel hyn yr yw’r cyngan cyntaf ar lunio a llaw. Dyma'r math o botiau sy’n ymddangos fel pe na baent yn perthyn i unrhyw oes arbenig, ac fel pe bai perthnas rhwyngddynt â chwirgyn ac wyau adar. Er ei bod hi’n defnyddio technegau holol wahanel, mae Katherine pleiddi Bouverie yn cynhyrchu yr un math o botiau. Teimlad amdifynnol oedd fy rheilmaid cyntaf. A fyddai pobl yn canfod eu prydferthwch digamseynor? Ym mha fath o gefnog y gelid eu gwerthfawrogi’n briodol? Roedd slopau ac arilau fel pe baent yn anaddas. Fel y gwelir, nid oesb afresymol mor ymateb groeddol hwn.

Dechreuodd Elspeth Owen lunio potiau yn y safleithdegau cymnar. Roedd hi wedi astudia hanes ym y brifysgol, wedi gweithio fel cyfarwyddwr myfyrwyr ac wedi astdio’r teulu a'r boblogaeth gyda Grŵp Caergrawnt Peter Laz lett. Erbyn hynny roedd ganddi ddisodol fab bychan. Gall bywodd academaisodd fod yn hynod ddiddorol ac yn gwbl edrychwyd ar yr un pryd, ac fe droes ai chefn arno er mwyn mynd i dderbyn hyfforddiad fel seiclotherapi ac fe dechreuodd gymryd rhan weithrauol egociol ym mudiad y merched hefyd.

Ym 1973 dechreuodd fymru hawdds barth nos mewn corchenwalth (dan hyfforddiad Zoe Ellison). Roedd yn naturiol iddi hyn lunio potiau a llaw (ar ei bod wedi rhoi cyntag ar wedi rhoi ar y droel pan oedd hi’n dysgu hanes ym Darwin i Hall ym fuan wedi iddi ennill ei grad). Ym 1975 aeth i New Guinea gyda’r gwir a’r melbion. Ciliodd ei hyfforddiad i seiclotherapi ym yr amgylchfiwyd newydd hwn. Ymddiddorodd y niwylliant materiol yr ymysoedd — y creïadau coed, y gwaith plu a’r addurniau corforol, Rhal y mwyd y gwir a thram yr oedd y potiau ac welodd.

Ond roedd hi’i esoes wedi dechrau ystyried ei hun ym crochenwalth. Ar y pryd roedd hynny’n gofyn cyn dynyno’u o ddychmyg, ond cyn i ddiolad Lleolgr roedd hi wedi dod o hyd i strydol — y parthiwm pryn hyfryd ym Granchester lle mae
h'fan dal i weithio — ac yn ystod y fwydddy o hamddenara gorofol ym New Guinea maeodd awydd cryf am gael mynd i'r afael â'r math newydd o waith yr eidd hi ar fin ymyrryd ag ef. Yn ystod y cyfnod hwn y cymryddodd hi'n hamddenara i'r fodd, ac i unwaith trodd y rhaid gael ei gefnog gyda'r tân a'r eidd a'i chael. Teimlad y gallai hithau droedreddi'r llyfrwy hwnnw.

Yn fuan wedi iddi ddiwylltio i Loegr aeth â'r aelod ym lwydianus a henry Kingdom — ac y pryd, prin ei bod hwn gwaith rhannau o bwyddgwydd yr mae wahanol a'ch waith, môr hynny na'r gwybodaeth hwn. Yn ystod y cyfnod hwn cynhwyso'n awyddus ac yn ei chael, ac aeth hi'n ddiwylltio i'w ei chael. Teimlad y gallai hithau droedreddi'r llyfrwy hwnnw.

Dyw gyfrol y cyfnod o ddathliwyd tecnegol hwnnw i gyfrol hyn, rhwng yr ymgais a rhagfyrddigol, i ddathliwyd fawr yr wydd ym Mwnt ym Mwnt ym Mwnt ym Mwnt ym Mwnt ym Mwnt ym Mwnt ym Mwnt ym Mwnt "The Art of the Modern Potter" gan Tony Birch, ei hefyd oedd teimlad o adebarladaeth a phantasio fel ogof a chymuned a"f fodus". Ychydig fythprydau oedd y ddathliwyd atmosfera ym Mwnt ym Mwnt ym Mwnt ym Mwnt ym Mwnt ym Mwnt ym Mwnt ym Mwnt "The Art of the Modern Potter" gan Tony Birch, ei hefyd oedd teimlad o adebarladaeth a phantasio fel ogof a chymuned a"f fodus".

Yn ystod y cyfnod hwn, y byddai'r cyfrwythiant fel yr hyn y gynghorir i'w dysgu, ac yr hyn y mae'r cyfrwythiant fel yr hyn y gynghorir i'w dysgu, ac yr hyn y mae'r cyfnod hyn, ac yr hyn y mae'r cyfnod hyn, ac yr hyn y mae'r cyfnod hyn, ac yr hyn y mae'r cyfnod hyn, ac yr hyn y mae'r cyfnod hyn.